



Yu Aoki is a Level III Ph.D. Student in International Relations. He is currently working on a dissertation entitled “Estimating Intentions to Use Force: How the United States Assessed Military Threats in International Crises, 1949-1982.” He recently won the Early Research Initiative Knickerbocker Award for Archival Research in American Studies.

Sarah Lenfest: Could you tell us a little more about your dissertation?

Yu Aoki: My dissertation tests theories that explain how foreign policy officials make estimates of other states’ intentions when they threaten to use force. Each theory argues that foreign policy officials use a particular indicator associated with threatening states to make estimates of the credibility of other state’s threats. These indicators are military readiness, the importance of the interests at stake in disputes, potential costs of failure to follow through with threats, availability of alternative policies to pursue the interests at stake, and the records of threatening states’ past actions. I test these theories by process-tracing how the US policy officials assessed military threats in international crises, using primary sources collected through archival research.

I have learned a lot from my advisor Peter Liberman. Writing to propose your views tends to narrow your focus too much and make you self-affirmative, at least for me. However, whenever I showed these tendencies, Peter kindly reminded me of them and made constructive suggestions. I managed to win a few major research grants in the past three years, but cannot imagine these accomplishments without his help.

SL: What made you choose archival research as a primary method?

YA: Although I was impressed by qualitative works on reputations and audience costs in the signaling literature, I was not completely satisfied with their conclusions because some of them used only secondary historical works. In general, historians should be more knowledgeable about a particular historical event than political scientists; however, they do not write their books and articles to specifically test political science theories. The suggestion here is that failure to find evidence to support a particular theory in existing historical works does not eliminate the possibility that unfound evidence exists in primary sources. Even historians have to pick and choose evidence. Once I got into archives, my intuition seemed to be validated. I found a number of gems to support theories that were not empirically supported before.

SL: What has your experience at the GC been like? How has the academic and political environment here shaped your thinking and your work?

YA: I worked as a teaching assistant to General (Retired) David H. Petraeus for seven semesters, and this was a great experience to observe how a policymaker thinks. Accustomed to having to absorb information with very little time, Gen. Petraeus strongly preferred concise writing and presentation. He had a “Rapid Fire Round Briefings” assignment: students had to report on a particular current event within three minutes. He also cared deeply about the nuance of writing. As a policy official whose speech and writing may have a significant effect on US foreign policy, he could not be too careful with his words.

I believe that most of my colleagues are interested in policymaking in addition to academic issues. What I learned from my experiences with Gen. Petraeus is that policymakers are not so familiar and interested in political science literature, so that if we really want to influence them, we have to tailor our research to a specific policy issue — making suggestions concise, concrete, and actionable.